



**DAVID CLAPP** is filling in for Contributing Editor Lee Price. David has been Director of the Chattanooga-Hamilton County (Tenn.) Bicentennial Library since 2002. He served as a Supervisor and Branch Manager in Chicago from 1980–89 and Assistant Director in Chattanooga in charge of automation and branch services from 1989–2002; clapp\_david@lib.chattanooga.gov.

David is reading *Provenance: How a Con Man and a Forger Rewrote the History of Modern Art* by Laney Salisbury and Aly Sujo.

“Bringing in the Money” presents fundraising strategies for public libraries. Many librarians are turning to alternative funding sources to supplement shrinking budgets. Fundraising efforts not only boost finances, but also leverage community support and build collaborative strategies.

# Fee-Based Services

The irony for public library service is that we have a wildly successful and efficient business, wholly based on once-a-year tax support. When the economy is bad, funding often declines despite increasing demand for services. Our model requires us to offer free access to our materials, maintain the anonymity of our users, and depend entirely on the good will of citizens who vote and are well off enough to donate money. Unfortunately, that latter group is also most likely to pay for Internet service and utilize convenient fee-based home delivery options from places like Amazon and Netflix. We risk being marginalized unless we can find fee-based services that demonstrate the low-cost efficiencies of our work.

The options are fairly limited. Library clients are not identical to shoppers at stores like Barnes & Noble. Most come to us for free content, not to spend money. Retail options such as coffee shops may not attract sufficient use for a franchise operator. We are more likely to attract a short-term demand for lunch from a group of genealogists on a day trip than a steady demand for high-end coffee products. However, there are complementary services that help local residents with basic needs. One solid alternative is to become a passport agent for the federal government. Library employees have to pay attention to detail, and have a strong respect for patron privacy and quality customer service. Helping patrons obtain passports is daunting, but a fulfilling and positive experience.

At Chattanooga-Hamilton County (Tenn.) Bicentennial Library (CHCBL), we learned about this opportunity through occasional mentions in library articles and through information about the acceptance agency program in a U.S. Government depository newsletter. However, there is no requirement that a library be a U.S. Government Depository. Any public library can contact their local office of the State Department, let them know that they are interested in becoming a passport acceptance facility, and send them a notarized list of prospective full-time employees willing and able to complete either in-person training or an online test certifying them as passport agents. These employees must be documented U. S. citizens and be approved by the State Department.

We applied to the New Orleans office shortly before Hurricane Katrina hit in August 2005. As a consequence, our approval was delayed until staff from the New Orleans office had set up temporary quarters in Charleston, South Carolina. Part of the review was an explanation of why a new agent was necessary in our area. We

noted that we were open six days and four evenings a week, which offered a substantial addition to the daytime, standard-work-week schedule at a nearby U.S. Post Office. We are also the only acceptance facility in our area that allows walk-in applicants during the week, though we do require appointments on weekends and evenings. We believe allowing walk-ins is part of our basic customer service.

Our initial outlay for this program included \$1,500 for a camera/printer outfit, \$1,000 for a computer/dual-sided scanner/printer for driver's licenses, \$300 for a rolling lockable cart, \$5 to \$10 a day in postage, and fifteen minutes to an hour and a half in staff time to complete each application. The best advice we received from another librarian acceptance agent is to *always* have another passport agent at your facility check the paperwork before it leaves the building. There is a great deal of detailed information required on an application and it is easy to overlook an error or misinterpret a regulation. Good communication between your passport agents is a must as the regulations are dense and intricate. Consultations between staff on regulations are often essential to successful interpretations. Your mileage may vary, but our experience is that the easily completed, fully documented, fifteen-minute passport is the exception (much thanks to Robert Drake, manager of our central library, for these observations).

CHCBL earns \$25 for each completed application and we charge \$10 if we take the applicant's picture. The amount we earn each year varies depending on changes in passport fees and regulations. In our first full fiscal year (July 2006 through June 2007), we cleared \$46,000 after expenses, but we average about

\$42,250 each year. Applications in 2007 and 2008 were high because new regulations established in January 2007 required American citizens to have passports when traveling to Mexico, Canada, or the Caribbean. Demand spiked again last year because the State Department had scheduled a fee increase midyear in 2010. There are also seasonal variations. The first four months of a new calendar year are almost always two to three times busier for us than the last few months of a year, probably because of planned trips later in the year.

The Chattanooga metro area serves about 500,000 people living in Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama. It is about one hundred miles away from Knoxville, Nashville, Atlanta, Georgia, and Birmingham. As a result, CHCBL is the largest and best equipped library for most residents within a fifty-mile radius of our downtown library. On the downside, we have no marketing budget to inform these outlying areas about our programs and there is no free parking near our library except on weekends and during the evening hours. With only four branches and a main library serving a large urban county of 330,000, many of our county residents live more than ten miles away from our nearest branch. We also have a relatively small Hispanic population and a very small percentage of others with connections outside the U.S.

An urban library with branches no more than a few miles from county or city residents, free or subsidized parking near the main library, more evening and weekend hours, and a large percentage of local residents with connections abroad may net a great deal more money than we have achieved

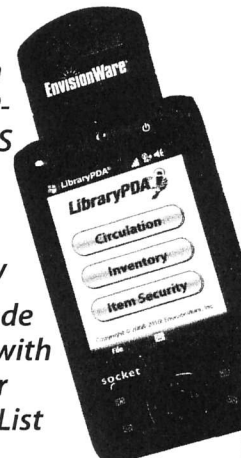
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from the passport program. Some of the library sites we looked at before taking this step were earning more than \$100,000 a year. On the flipside, if budget limitations have prevented you from offering evening or weekend hours, you may have a tough sale convincing the State Department that your community needs a new passport agent.

The ideal location for this would be a large department at a main library able to handle walk-in applicants and open beyond the standard customer service hours at the local post office. We arranged training for about a half dozen full-time employees in our business, science, and technology department, which also included our government documents collection. Typically, at least two certified passport agents should be on hand at all times to check each other's work and to handle different aspects of the application process. Once vacations, split shifts, and sick days are taken into consideration, five or six trained agents seem to be a minimum.

Demand is steady, but not overwhelming except on weekends and during evening hours. We do ask applicants to make appointments during these difficult times. Despite notices in our marketing and on our website, the few complaints we receive from patrons (two or three a year) usually occur during the times we require appointments. We still do our best to accommodate walk-ins during this time and often have two applications going at the same time. As noted, there is a wide variance in the amount of time each application may take. A patron waiting for one agent may see their agent process only one person while the agent working next to them processes three.

So far, we have been able to handle the demand without adding additional personnel or overtime hours. Though we also offer notary services for a fee, and have a volunteer-run library bookstore that pays for a volunteer coordinator, no other library enterprise raises anywhere near as much money for the

library as the passport program.

When we started the program, we were open six days and four evenings a week. We since experimented with a seven-day, two-evening schedule. Due to budget limitations, we have been unable to continue Sunday service or add back in the other two evenings. Even so, we finished our last fiscal year with the best average monthly totals in our four-year history. The passport program feels as integral to our basic service as our online GED training, our English as a Second Language classes, and our steady demand for job assistance.

As the public library continues to change and competition for convenient access to fiction and entertainment materials continues to intensify, there appears to be a strong argument for branding as the principal location for sorting out complex government, job, and health issues. For example, there is no reason why we can't be the principal site for online learning, telehealth (the delivery of health-related services and information via telecommunications technologies) with sophisticated medical testing equipment and nurse practitioners connected with off-site specialists, and an adjunct to local career and business development centers. In any case, for the foreseeable future, libraries are competing for the designation of vital public services that deserve tax support. The more we are part of the overall solution of government services, the greater the likelihood our programs will be subsidized by tax dollars or fee-based services. In this vein, passports are a great beginning. **PL**

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